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Abstract

The past twenty years have been witness to what can be called a dialogue on the subject of the American postwar suburb. Keep in mind that though there has almost been three quarters of a century since the end of the Second World War and the inception of the post war suburb, only recently has there been a dialogue instead of a hostile chorus of criticism. Therein lies the tension between title and subtitle of this paper; after all, a dialogue by definition should have a back and forth, a point and counterpoint, while a jeremiad uniformly bewails. There has and continues to be a kind of intellectual default that pervades popular and scholarly examinations of the suburb. We cannot necessarily be sure from where this kind of stance was derived, whether the popular critique takes its cues from the scholarly or vice versa. When examining both popular and scholarly criticism it is easy to see that there is a kind of uniformity of deprecation, of judgmental displeasure toward the suburb. If we discount those boosters who might have had a vested interest in selling goods and houses, then we can only really begin to see a critical defense of the suburb in the past 20 years.

Comments

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Critical Dialogues on American Suburbia

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2006-2007 Penn Humanities Forum on Travel
Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

Final Project Paper
April 2007

The Suburban Jeremiads

Critical Dialogues on American Suburbia

By Gerard Leone

*quomodo sedet sola civitas
plena populo
facta est quasi vidua¹*

The past twenty years have been witness to what can be called a dialogue on the subject of the American postwar suburb. Keep in mind that though there has almost been three quarters of a century since the end of the Second World War and the inception of the post war suburb, only recently has there been a dialogue instead of a hostile chorus of criticism. Therein lies the tension between title and subtitle of this paper; after all, a dialogue by definition should have a back and forth, a point and counterpoint, while a jeremiad uniformly bewails. There has and continues to be a kind of intellectual default that pervades popular and scholarly examinations of the suburb. We cannot necessarily be sure from where this kind of stance was derived, whether the popular critique takes its cues from the scholarly or vice versa. When examining both popular and scholarly criticism it is easy to see that there is a kind of uniformity of deprecation, of judgmental displeasure toward the suburb. If we discount those boosters who might have had a vested interest in selling goods and houses, then we can only really begin to see a critical defense of the suburb in the past 20 years. Even then, perhaps “defense” is a word that may be too strong. Perhaps, it has only been the suspension of vitriol, a kind of calm when researching or describing the suburb. There has only been a dialogue insofar as there have been, recently, what might be considered suburban apologists. Still, there remains a powerful critical refrain that continues to be consistently and pervasively negative, hence why the paper’s title is not “the suburban question” or the “suburban

discussion” but the “suburban jeremiad.” In this paper I will outline the particular characteristics of the Jeremiad as it persists in the majority of the literature about the American suburb. I will then attempt to pose critique of the anti-sprawl arguments derived from the Jeremiad. Before I begin I would like to state that my position is not as an advocate of sprawl: I am far more of an apologist, perhaps even an unafraid relativist when it comes to the issue of American housing. I would like to think that if presented with either arguments for development or arguments that demonstrate concrete environmental repercussions, I could be convinced in either case. What is unconvincing about anti-sprawl argument is that they are based in or incidental to the anti-sprawl’s overriding animus. Perhaps one of the best ways to further explicate my position on the matter is to quote (at length, because it is worth it) one of the earliest and best examples of a desire for scholarship on the suburb sans hysterics:

“...[T]he rapid expansion of the large metropolitan settlements has been paralleled by a rising flood of commentary, reporting, and evaluating this remarkable event, and we have developed a new language for dealing with it. Although the scholarly contributions to this new literature tend to be appropriately restrained and the journalist and polemic contributions characteristically vituperative, the emerging patterns of settlement are typically greeted by both with disapproval if not frantic dismay. By now almost everyone knows that low density developments on the growing edge of the metropolis are a form of “cancerous growth,” scornfully dubbed with the most denunciatory of our new lexicon’s titles, “urban sprawl,” “scatteration,” “subtopia,” and now “slurbs” – a pattern of development that “threatens our national heritage of open space” while “decaying blight rots out the city’s heart” and a “demonic addiction to automobiles” threatens to “choke the life of our cities.” Clearly “our most cherished values” are imperiled by what is synoptically termed “urban chaos.” However, such analysis by cliché is likely to be helpful only as incitement to action; and action guided by obsolescent truths is likely to be effective only as a reaffirmation of

ideology. Often we have erred, I believe, in taking the visual symbols of urbanization to be marks of the important qualities of urban society; we have compared these symbols with our ideological precepts of order and found that they do not conform; and so we have mistaken for “urban chaos” what is more likely to be a newly emerging order whose signal qualities are complexity and diversity.”ⁱⁱ

Melvin Webber wrote the above in 1970, and though it stands as a testament to how long the Jeremiad has existed, this paper will concentrate on the recent past, to note not only the Jeremiad but its presence in different forms.

Before I continue I would like to credit two particular studies of the literature of suburbia which were the first to identify this striking similarity of hostile opinion: In his essay “The Suburban Canon over Time” Paul Mattingly attributes the similarity of scholarly opinion on the suburb to the fact that all those who write on the suburb cite a small, common group of public officials, architects, planners.ⁱⁱⁱ The scholarly ignorance of the actual suburbanites and their reasoning for moving into suburbs, has lead to an intramural literature, one prone to narratives that are far too general and prejudicial (e.g. “flight”). The second, Robert Bruegmann’s *Sprawl*, pays a great deal of attention to an anti-sprawlist unity of sentiment, a judgment abetted by the necessary vagueness of the term “sprawl.” He systematically examines the various plans and remedies to the problems of suburban growth and then winnows away the ideological cast the data and policy directed at the suburb. Whether or not they are apologetics is unimportant, they are landmark critiques of the literature, revealing the obvious failings of scholars and fulfill the function of the exceptions which prove the rule of monolithic anti-suburb opinion. What neither study does is plunge headlong into the particular character of all

these similar judgments and then challenge the very basis of these judgments. This challenge to the intellectual default is my goal for the second half of this paper.

The Jeremiad isn't so much a trope as a similarity of tone, a commonality of taste-based conclusions. The Jeremiad doesn't necessarily imperil the soundness of a scholar's argument, but it will thoroughly imperil what kinds of arguments that they will undertake. The Jeremiad is a prejudice, perhaps both in the common understanding and in Gadamerian parlance, it restricts the kind of thinking that can be done on the subject. The authors who write and invoke the Jeremiad arrive at similar judgments about the nature of suburban life and so we are in a position to ask whether these common conclusions come from common premises. Where do these assumptions about communities, the nature of the good life, about settlement patterns come from? This paper may, in the larger debate, be characterized as apologist, but its aims are far more theoretical: we must re-think the fundamental questions on which we base our blanket hostility to a highly complex, nuanced, and relatively young phenomenon, a phenomenon that now houses almost half of the population of the United States.

The Jeremiad:

The Jeremiad is primarily composed of three supposed indictments: homogeneity, consumption/corporatism, and the destruction of both cities and the rural districts. The polemical critics of the suburb are myriad and the sheer brightness of their hatred makes the Jeremiad obvious, so much so that it might obscure the Jeremiad's more subtle presence in less polemical, scholarly literatures. We must look to quieter, more restrained authors to note the Jeremiad's subtle and pervasive presence.

One of these scholarly works is Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, a book rightly praised for establishing the historical links between the construction of the suburbs and federal transit policies. *Crabgrass Frontier* is generally understood to be one of the first complete scholarly histories of the suburb, and one which admirably did not continue the standard vitriolic treatment of the popular literature. Despite Jackson's admirable scholarship, the Jeremiad does persist and appears in the book in rather obvious ways; we will look to his analysis of the implications of the suburb, leaving his analysis of transportation policy alone. In the very first lines of his text, Jackson quotes from a standard, polemical, anti-suburban tract, John Keat's *The Crack in the Picture Window*: "Even while you read this whole square miles of identical boxes are spreading like gangrene...developments conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch."^{iv} It is curious that a book generally regarded for its scholarly objectivity should begin with this quote. Jackson gives no indication that the quote is meant ironically, as if it were some relic of a time before scholars could consider the suburb dispassionately. We can see in the simple quote by Keats all the aspects of the Jeremiad are present: Homogeneity ("identical boxes"), consumption ("nurtured by greed"), and destruction ("corroding everything they touch"). It is as if disgust at the suburb was inevitable, an inescapable objective fact; it seems as though, for most writers, to have studied the suburb is to have come away with a disgust for it.

In the chapter, "The Loss of Community in Metropolitan America," Jackson strays into what Mattingly would call the "suburban canon" and I would call the Jeremiad.^v Jackson easily falls into the trap that Webber had mentioned, he begins to take the "visual symbols" of suburban life (even cultural products) as signs of an

unhealthy and destructive way of life. One of the first casualties of suburbanization is the “sense of community,” an airy enough term, but Jackson will account for this loss through a standard accounting of the suburb’s faults. Jackson bases his specious notion of “sense of belonging” on the fact that city people can identify themselves by their neighborhood and the sports team they root for. Suburbanites do not possess this kind of identity because their communities (e.g. “Rolling Meadows” or “River Grove”) are named by lying developers; evidently, there is no meadow and no grove, only houses.^{vi} Jackson uses a standard narrative of suburban flight to describe the arrival of homogenous, white communities in the suburbs and the creation of equally homogenous black communities in the cities. This is termed “segregation” by Jackson, making the obvious, pejorative comparison of suburbanites to bigots. The actual physical separation of the rich in the suburbs and the poor in the cities also serves Jackson as a quiet judgment passed on morally bereft, unsympathetic suburbanites. The most obvious identification of urban symbols with a friendly ideology is the indictment of modern entertainment: Jackson invokes all the standard symbols of urban culture, “concert halls, opera houses, ballet companies, museums, shopping streets,” as examples of a superior culture, and then poses the contrast with the suburbanite and his television.^{vii} Which choice of life, urban or suburban, is meant to be seen as more virtuous? “Cities, by their very nature, ought to encourage the elevation of the human spirit,”^{viii} but for some reason that escapes Jackson, suburbanites prefer to stay in their own locales. They do not avail themselves of the obvious superiority of the city, preferring the “isolation” of their homes, and the “desolation” of their streets. The loss of the suburban porch is another fell symbol, meant to represent a kind of atrophied communal limb which had fallen off.

Lastly, the air conditioner and the television are implicated in the final communal destruction, confining the suburbanite to his home: "No longer forced outside by the heat and humidity, no longer attracted by the corner drugstore, and no longer within walking distance of relatives, suburbanites often choose to remain in the family room."^{ix} Jackson, like many others, also follows another standard tactic in the Jeremiad, what I call "exposing the suburban ideal." A patently ridiculous, overly rosy view of a house, a lawn, and happy white family is proven to exist by the author. Most often the author uses popular media and advertising to support this supposedly commonly held notion and then proceeds to expose the suburban ideal as a kind of lie, demonstrating that each component part, the home, the car, the lawn is part an parcel of the "loss of community," etc. As Jackson concludes the book he not only credits the suburban ideal (corporate boosterism) as a "necessary condition for residential deconcentration" but also two "fundamental causes- racial prejudice and cheap housing." By the close of *Crabgrass Frontier*, the suburbanite has been proven to be racist, bereft of culture, lazy, and even ignorant of the lies being used to sell him his own house. Through his combination of faults the suburbanite is responsible for the destruction of an inherently superior way of life. Jackson mercifully doesn't have a predilection for the countryside lest the suburbanite be implicated in the destruction of open space, but other commentators will take up that accusation for him.

Once again, *Crabgrass Frontier* is understood as a far more objective, less vitriolic history of the suburb, yet the default judgment of the Jeremiad's presence can be easily seen. It is not my wish to go through an exhaustive review of the literature to prove the existence of the Jeremiad,^x anyone with an acquaintance with only a few

articles or books can see the similarity of tone and argument. I only wish to demonstrate a few representative examples which will be useful to beginning our more theoretical discussion. I would like to consider one example of the Jeremiad in response to those who might be considered suburban apologists. In an issue of the *American Quarterly* devoted to the suburban debate William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock tried to reify almost every aspect of the Jeremiad in order to rebut sympathetic treatments of the suburb. Sharpe and Wallock helpfully attempted to identify the virtues of the city that remained undefined and poetic in *Crabgrass Frontier*:

“Although suburbs have attained many of the functions of traditional cities, they are not fully comparable to cities. In our view, equating suburbs with cities implies that suburbs possesses a diversity, cosmopolitanism, political culture, and public life that most of them still lack and that most cities still afford.”^{xi}

The defense of the suburb that Sharpe and Wallock tried to attack was a kind of theoretical renovation of the city/suburb dichotomy. According to the defenders of the suburb, we should ask ourselves where does the city end and the suburb begin? Our notions of city and suburb rely on the abstractions, almost always of the building stock: skyscrapers are in cities, strip malls are in suburbs, row homes are in cities, ranchers in suburbs. The defenders essentially encourage a change in definitions, because if our definitions of the city/suburb are antiquated, artificial, and fuzzy so, too, are our conclusions. One method was to replace the dichotomy with a more subtle taxonomy of settlement, introducing “nodes” or “edge cities;” others, in a more polemical bent, declared that there was no city/suburb/rural, there was only human settlement in differing gradients of density.

Sharpe and Wallock's reactionary criticism reasserts the distinction between suburb and city based almost solely the arguments that surround the Jeremiad. There is no singular problem that defines the suburb for Sharpe and Wallock, it is a host of ideologically charged issues (e.g. race, gender, the environment, consumerism) in which suburbia is always in the wrong. For Sharpe and Wallock's, diversity is the hallmark of city-ness, and so they quote at length from studies that show that despite the increased presence of minorities in the suburb, these minorities are concentrated in their own separate communities. "Segregation," a token of the Jeremiad's indictments of homogeneity, is a word used again and again to describe the presence of African Americans in the suburbs. Aside from this, Sharpe and Wallock return to age old assumptions of the city's "culture" in comparison to the suburb's consumerism. Aside from this it is noted that the "culture of consumption" of the suburbs "merely reinforces the homogeneity it supposedly erodes."^{xii} Opponents, "suburbanophiles," are accused of "buying into suburban ideology" and essentially allowing themselves to be taken in by the cultural products of corporations, etc. Like Jackson, Sharpe and Wallock feel compelled to dispel the "suburban ideal" and so they manufacture one out of television programs from *Father knows Best* to movies like *Home Alone*, as if these particular products provided any insight into actual suburban lives.^{xiii}

One very recent example will help to demonstrate that the Jeremiad is still a potent and pervasive intellectual default. Dolores Hayden's *A Field Guide to Sprawl*, published in 2004, brings this analysis to the recent past. The experience of traveling by air over the suburb is an experience invoked again and again by critics attempting to grasp the suburb in its entirety.^{xiv} Thus, the aerial photograph is *the* way of depicting

sprawl, and a simple image search under “sprawl” or “suburb” will bring up a host of these aerial images. Hayden’s *Field Guide* is a catalogue of pejorative terms for the suburb that are meant to be illustrated by these aerial photos. In her intro, Hayden reasons that only through the application of pejoratives can the anti-sprawlist counteract the names used by officials and corporations to hide the inherent racism, the destruction, and corporate excess. Why photograph the suburban landscape from the air? Hayden, like others, is suspicious of the facades and ground-level views which are apparently the province of corporations and developers. In order to find the truth suburban false facades must be overcome through elevation, and we can be reasonably certain that if we agree with Hayden, what we find won’t be good. The view of the suburbs from above acts as an excellent metaphor for the reader’s moral or spiritual superiority. More importantly, as Hayden illustrates each pejorative term (e.g. “Mall glut” or “Litter on a stick”) she does remarkably little interpreting. Hayden does not need to interpret the pictures to the reader because she and the reader are taking the Jeremiad for granted. The viewer, acquainted with Jeremiad or prompted by Hayden’s righteous introduction will not see images that need to be interpreted but symbols of things which are meant to be despised. The composition and content of the images lend themselves to be understood through the Jeremiad.

Photographs of “big box” stores become representations of the consumerism and corporations decried by the Jeremiad (example image a). The illustration for the term “category-killer” is an aerial shot of a large, boxy, Home Depot store and its parking lot.^{xv} According to Hayden, by getting above the façade, you can see what the corporations hope to conceal. It’s all very secretive until one realizes that all one sees

when one sees from above is a roof. What insight does one gain from this picture of the roof and parking lot? The description mentions that the “category killer,” “cannibalizes” smaller, “independent” stores. From the air, all one can see is the great blank roof and its many air conditioners. There is no insight to be gained from the air, the only thing a person can see is what they want to see, namely a symbol of faceless (see the flat, unarticulated roof) corporate practice and the death of smaller, independent stores, which by virtue of their smallness and independence are thus authentic and superior. One cannot actually see corporate practice or control in a photograph, one must bring the notion of “consumerism” and project it onto the literally blank canvas of the roof. Illustrations for the terms “zoomburb,” “boomburb,” “sitcom suburb,” and “clustered world” all feature aerial views of suburban developments in order to demonstrate homogeneity (example image b).^{xvi} The pictures of complete, fully constructed suburbs are meant to illustrate the inexorable growth of suburban developments, but once again, all we can see are roofs. The aerial photograph cannot help but present developments filled with the same looking homes because the farther above the development one goes, the more differences and the homeowner’s individual choices are minimized. Some pictures show obviously new developments in which each house has the original coat of paint and there are no mature trees, but this is not mentioned, all that is understood is sameness (the accusation of racism is not far behind). The farther above the suburban housing development one might go, the easier it is to generalize, to paint in broad strokes about the mythic “cookie cutter” nature of the suburb. Other pictures apparently illustrate the loss of open space, for example see the pictures which illustrate “Leapfrog” and “Greenfield.” (example image c)^{xvii} We do not know any of the circumstances which

caused this land to be developed, but we are meant to understand that the loss of any open space to development is, no matter what, wrong. The photos used by Hayden rely on tourist notions of “nature;” the aerial photographs only depict a nature that is generalized, majestic, sacred and undisturbed. The Jeremiad’s suburb usually lies in the foreground and though we have no notion of the context of the photograph we are to understand instinctively that the suburb has probably taken the land from the small farmer or some wild habitat. The aerial photograph plays on contemporary, tourist notions of place, where mountain peaks, plains, and quaint farms are aesthetic objects, which need to be preserved so that they will remain aesthetic objects for the delectation of tourists. The suburban development, by its very presence is a threat to the dream of the untouched past and by implication this development will surely grow, and expand into the purity and home of virtue that is the American family farm. But the gaze of the aerial photograph is a resolutely tourist gaze, one to enthrall and appall and then fly on. Its implication is easily understood by people without technical training: that something beautiful is threatened by suburbia. All the aerial photograph can do is imply, it cannot diagnose, it cannot explain the petty concerns on the ground, like families, schools, water, business, infrastructure, these things are effectively generalized away through distance; the faceless, generic suburb becomes an object easy to demonize especially when an abstract notion of the good is introduced.

An Unfriendly Analysis of Jeremiad’s Arguments

The above examples are meant as representative illustrations of the Jeremiad in its more subtle, scholarly forms as history, reactionary criticism, and as visual

representation. We can return to Webber's prophetic description of the above scholarship to guide us now in the questions that we pose to those who espouse the Jeremiad.

Against what ideological precepts has the suburb been found lacking? What are the premises that prove the city (as it is understood) the superior way of life? We will examine the various accusations, the first and most straightforward of which is the accusation of homogeneity, one aspect of which is the notion of homogeneous appearance. We can look to Dolores Hayden's photographs and ask "is the accusation of homogeneity that inconceivable?" After all, if the houses are all built in the same template, aren't they in fact the same? To this there are several replies, first among them is that Dolores Hayden's method of examining the suburb from the air amplifies and abstracts the fact that suburban houses are made from oft repeated designs and then makes this fact something to sneer at. But, if we accept the city/suburb dichotomy, how do the city's row houses avoid this accusation? The row home's facades are even more uniform than the much derided suburb and yet, somehow, the row house is exempt from the criticism that it is the same as all the others. We cannot escape the fact that the only way that modern construction practices could have been able to provide millions upon millions of homes to people is to have sacrificed the idiosyncratic treatments of architects in order that houses be affordable and quickly constructed. Nearly every American lives in a house that is exactly the same model of house of someone else. Aside from this, notice that the photos which are used to emphasize the similarity of the homes (and thus their inhabitants) are newly built, with all of the same developer's treatments. If one is to look at the now 60 year old Levittown homes, each home has received their owner's myriad renovations and alterations and so few look at all the same; with mature trees and

a patina of age, these suburbs are almost immune to the accusation of homogeneity, in appearance at least.

As mentioned several times during the course of this paper, racism is an aspect of Jeremiad attendant on the accusation of homogeneity. In prominent cases like school bussing in Boston, overt racism must be counted among the many reasons for the movement of whites to the suburbs. At the same time, in some treatments, racism is made to be the sole reason that whites left the city. Interpretation of statistics like those used by Sharpe and Wallock is meant to downplay the increased presence of minorities in the suburbs in order to reaffirm homogeneity. They essentially say that despite greater and greater numbers of minorities in the suburbs, they are in their own insular communities, they are certainly not evenly spread out, perfectly mixed in with the rest of the population. If the suburb cannot be faulted for the lack of minorities, it can be faulted for a politically imperfect distribution. A less prominent aspect of the homogeneity accusation is the economic/class homogeneity of suburban developments, an unavoidable consequence of similarly priced houses all being placed in the same developments. I would not like to go about trying to downplay or re-characterize the statistics, neither am I inclined to insist on the politically conservative's invocation of market choice. What is important is an investigation of the intellectual defaults at play in spite of their power in political rhetoric.

As Sharpe and Wallock mention, the suburb, by its very composition runs afoul of the values of "diversity" and "cosmopolitanism." Once again, if we accept the suburb/city dichotomy and look to the city itself, we can see that the city does not truly exemplify the value itself. Neighborhoods in the city, by definition are collections of one

ethnic group, or one socioeconomic group, which can be hostile and exclude the outsider in various ways. If we accept this as a kind of “way of the world,” where like will live near like, then what are the virtues of heterogeneity? Is the city’s superiority based on the fact that particular groups live closer together than they do in the suburb? If this is the case then diversity is not actually a function of different peoples as much as degree of propinquity. Even then, various groups of people live in closer proximity, perhaps they interact, what then? How is this virtue in itself? Louis Mumford was perhaps the first to formulate a position on the city’s diversity as a virtue;^{xviii} in his conception, the virtue of diversity is simply the seeing of other people, which must, phenomenologically produce a cosmopolitan tolerance. In the case of socioeconomic diversity, Mumford was under the impression that if people were confronted by poverty in their daily lives, then they would become more sympathetic and moral. The great detriment of suburban life, for Mumford, would be the fact that people are not confronted by the poor, and so, he assumes, they will become ignorant of class struggle and inequality and thus become politically and morally incorrect. It is as if, simply by seeing people of different statuses, it is inevitable that feelings of sympathy and pity for the poor will develop. The assumptions of this view are glaring and obvious, yet in many ways they are shared by those who espouse heterogeneity as a value. We must ask what does diversity do by virtue simply of its existence: there are many groups of people in one place, if they do not interact maybe then the much vaunted value of diversity is dispensed with. What does the proximity of different people really do, does it always work to create some kind of positive effect? Counterexamples include the insularity of neighborhoods and the obvious stereotypes held by everyone about everyone else just as apparent in cities as in suburbs.

We can contrast the use of the concept “diversity” in business or an institution versus its use in the context of the suburbia debate. In business, for example, a diversity of viewpoint and experience among a workforce devoted to a common goal of selling a product will make for a more successful product because its creation and marketing will be informed by different views. Diversity in a human settlement, with various groups living next to one another, has no goal, there is no reason that all these different experiences and viewpoints will be elicited. The neighborhood is not an institution dedicated to a goal, it is where we live, it serves a need, it does not have the institutional rules which make it serve a larger cultural purpose like education, etc. The critic of the suburb sees different communities living next to one another as an aesthetic experience, one which should be preserved and one which they believe has an amorphous and indescribable worth for the “spirit.” Traveling between a few different neighborhoods with their different restaurants and languages is seen as one of the great pleasures of city life (as fetishized by Jane Jacobs, et al.), and another reason why the suburbanite is inferior.

In a more theoretical mode, I would characterize “diversity” as a concept which has taken the place of or subsumed the classical liberal concept of “tolerance.” We can look to the tolerance of philosophers like Mill for the example, wherein the state should abide by the harm principle, “you’re free to do, work, and worship as you please so long as you aren’t hurting anyone.” This particular notion of tolerance can be credited among the rationales underlying the various civil rights movements and perhaps even multiculturalism. The use of tolerating difference for the sake of social harmony has become confused with the idea that difference is needed and should be celebrated; the

tolerant but homogenous community doesn't celebrate diversity by virtue of its sameness and so sameness is confused with intolerance. The suburb, by virtue of its mythic sameness comes out on the wrong side of the diversity/tolerance issue. The conflation of these concepts in the modern mind and its confrontation with the suburb can be seen, for example, in the movie *Pleasantville*. The movie is shot in black and white and is set in a television suburb of the 1950's in order to play on the clichés of the suburban situation comedies of the period. Two contemporary teenagers are transported into this black and white (see homogenous) television suburb of Pleasantville and become upsetters of and commentators on the fictitious suburban order. During the course of the film citizens of Pleasantville begin to turn from black and white to color ("coloreds"). For some reason the suburban townsfolk become afraid and persecute the "coloreds" among them. The movie concludes with a court scene in which one of the contemporary teenagers extols the values of tolerance *and* of color over black and white; the suburbanites subsequently embrace color/diversity. The symbolism is absurdly heavy handed, but the moral is clear, homogenous places (the suburbs suburb) need to be taught the democratic values of diversity-tolerance. The assumption inherent in the movie is that the homogenous will react negatively to diversity and try to assert homogeneity through intolerance and bigotry. This assumption is patently untrue; the black and white, homogenous suburbanites are equated with racists, but we know that suburbanites living in generally homogenous communities are not racist simply by virtue of their living arrangements. Suburbanites who, by chance, live in "homogenous" communities work with minorities, send their children to schools with minorities, and even vote for candidates who belong to

a minorities. Neither diverse nor homogenous settlements necessarily make for the politically correct virtue used to damn the suburb.

For the purposes of this paper, I separated the variegated complaints of the suburb into headings to help show their presence. Yet, to address and rebut the arguments and assumptions of the next two aspects of the Jeremiad, the “sins of consumption” and the “suburb as destroyer,” I will have to move between these two Jeremiad headings because they both draw on similar assumptions. The arguments that center on the notion of the suburb as destroyer of both city and the countryside are more defensive arguments, they are based in the idealization of particular (often historically contingent) qualities, which are purported to be imperiled, and thus must be defended. Opposition to corporations and large businesses is a powerful strain in the suburbia debate and should be noted, but through this analysis I do not mean to diffuse critiques to corporations in general.

The notion of the suburb as destroyer of the city is a smaller argument to tackle, if only because it is based on history. Essentially, the argument is understood as a kind of correlation, the suburbs grow and the cities fail. Various explanations are given for why the wealthier whites moved to the suburbs: some more popular narratives attribute it to a uniquely American quality, while other narratives often include the notion of irresponsible developers who, blind to the social realities of the city and concentrated solely on making a buck, open the flood gates draining away the middle class leaving the city for the poor. This particular narrative of the city dependent on the presence of middle class ballast is used by Kenneth Jackson to explain the decline of several cities.^{xix} The problem with this particular account is that it explicitly excludes the initial reasons why people wanted to move out of the city, for example, the rise of the service economy,

the decline of American industry, and the destructive urban renewal policies. The anti-sprawlist, relying on the aestheticized notion of city life described above cannot understand why a family would want to leave a center of culture, entertainment, and “authentic” life (to which the suburbanite replies “jobs and schools”). If one abandon’s polemical constructions of the history of the suburb, then one might be able to account for the complexities of race and class in a history, yet this is beside the point because the Jeremiad does not use complicated narratives. In its standard historical narrative, the city dweller cum suburbanite leaves because of race, greed, or because he doesn’t understand what an inherently superior “spiritual” life the city affords.

It depends upon the goals of the narrative, but those histories written with the Jeremiad in mind pinpoint a variety of forces so as to put the suburb in the wrong. We can look to reactionary critics of the suburban apologists for a particularly good example of this: Andrew Ross, a historian of American labor, reviewed Robert Bruegman’s *Sprawl* and in his review he astutely observed some of Bruegman’s more imaginative attempts to recast the movement of the rich to the suburb as an inexorable historical process. Ross is correct to note the “flawed sociological imagination”^{xx} of Bruegman, but more importantly we must note that Bruegman’s characterization of urban history is no more fanciful than the authors of the Jeremiad. Bruegman places the suburb at the mercy of inexorable historical forces in the hopes that by recharacterizing social movement in this way, the suburb can be exculpated of the guilt heaped upon it in standard histories of the suburb. Bruegman is playing the game of the Jeremiad’s authors in reverse. Ross faults Bruegman not because apologist/booster history is unscholarly, but because Ross has an entirely different history of the suburb that insists on labor

relations and corporate scheming. Ross characterizes the movement of corporations to the suburbs as a move by the corporations to cripple the power of labor. While it may be true that the corporations left the labor strongholds of the cities for the suburbs strategically, Ross blithely assumes that the suburb must be held responsible for this turn in the struggle between management and labor. The political sins of corporations are somehow visited on the families, small business, homes, and municipalities of the suburb simply because of their existence. One can only count the suburb as accomplice in corporate scheming if one takes an overly broad conception of the suburb which ignores the myriad factors which actually produced the suburb and the unique socioeconomic moment of change in corporate practice. Ross also makes his political understanding of the suburb clear as he fishes out the various points on which the libertarian Bruegman is in the academic political wrong, especially in terms of the environment; Ross damn Bruegman in a political context by saying that the "Bush administration would have no problem with [Bruegman's] assessments."^{xxi} Ultimately it is easy to find the reasons why the suburb is in the wrong if you have already assumed it. We must consider the fact that there is a history of the suburb that can be written, but that it is not the reason why the animus toward the suburb exists. The suburb doesn't possess guilt, it isn't a phenomenon that requires one to go back and study for precedent and historical detail, it isn't law or the study of historical grievances; it is a phenomenon, like many other social phenomena with a material culture and should be approached with a modicum of scholarly objectivity. The history of the suburb is written as if it will prove the suburb's guilt and this is not the case.

If we switch the idea of the suburb's victim from the city to the countryside we can consider a new series of interesting issues. Dolores Hayden's photographs can be primarily understood in the vein of the suburb as destroyer of the countryside: Andrew Ross, who also reviewed the *Field Guide*, found it to be "frank agitprop," worthy of making the suburbanites rise up against their own dwellings. As mentioned before, the aerial photo effectively idealizes nature and the family farm so as to imply their peril before the constantly growing suburb. There is one assumption at present in Dolores Hayden's *Field Guide* that can be addressed in a factual way: according to the Jeremiad's exaggerated fears, the suburb will keep growing and growing. As Bruegman notes in *Sprawl*, the highest rate of suburban growth in terms of space was in 50's; aside from this, the suburbs continue to grow denser and take less and less land on their fringes. The notion that the suburbs will continue to grow and grow is easy to imagine, but it is an image that runs counter to recent studies. The Jeremiad's notion of growth is an expansion of the simple, common experience of seeing development. A potential anti-sprawlist once knew a place that didn't have houses on it, but now does. If this experience is attached to Jeremiad then it can be easily exaggerated into a fear for all the undeveloped land in the world. The Jeremiad relies on the a virtuous farm field like those of the *Georgics*, while the forested countryside is understood in terms of "habitats" hallowed by the environmental movement. It is not as if I am advocating for the development of any piece of land in spite of the accumulated wisdom of environmental science. I am not weighing in on the value of environmental resources. I am proposing that the simplistic Jeremiad's understanding of the countryside and farmland is informed by the public relations work of environmentalists. Once again, the anti-sprawlist relies

on an overly aestheticized, romantic, tourist understanding of what farmland and forests do. Open space is meant to be delectated, forests are meant to be savored. This precious set of values should perhaps always fail when weighed against the concrete concerns of human need.

Lastly, let us take a look at one of the attacks of the Jeremiad, one based in the notion of the suburb as destroyer of “community” in contemporary life. This particular tactic attacks the form of the suburb, primarily along the lines of being ugly, unplanned, and as some charitable critics have termed it, “soul-destroying.” The “community” invoked by the anti-sprawlist can almost be defined negatively: whatever social interaction that suburbanites have is not community. A general form of the argument is that community is the sole the function of physical propinquity; thusly those most concerned with fostering “community” are planners and architects who believe that design is the determining factor in people’s social lives. The closely set houses of the city produce community because one is forced to confront one’s neighbors; aside from simple closeness, there is the notion of a pedestrian (“human”) scale which allows the urbanite to quickly get to the corner store for groceries, etc. Presumably, the corner store, lionized for its small un-corporateness, will have a clerk who will know the urbanite’s name and there will be pleasantries exchanged and “community” will ensue. Another portion of the argument relies on a characterization of technology/media as a force which acts to further alienate and isolate the members of suburbia; Jackson’s analysis of the car, air conditioning, and television is a standard form of this attack. The Jeremiad relies on these simple arguments to arrive at the caricature of the suburbanite as dumb, fat, car-bound, and television-affixed.

The driving force of this attack on the form of the suburb is a persistent and powerful nostalgia. Almost all arguments decrying the loss of community are based in a backward-looking conception.^{xxii} For example, if we look to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* we can see that the only kind of "community" that is studied is that derived from traditional conceptions of it. When Putnam sees a decline of the American community he only sees the decline in the holdings of "social capital" in the old, understood, registered accounts: Kiwanis clubs, churches, etc. New conceptions of community and social relationships have to be formulated because it is plain that suburbanites are not all misanthropes by virtue of their physical environment. We cannot become afraid of social changes simply because we grasped our older conceptions of society better. The "loss of community" charge is not only supported by antiquated conceptions but by idealized notions of the past. If one is an anti-sprawlist then the towns of the past had hand made homes with porches on which people talked and wide promenades on which people took leisurely strolls; so, too, the city neighborhoods before the second world war must have been wonderful, with vibrant street life and neighborhoods. Why can't we have that? This game is played in reverse by the suburban apologist. In his conception the town and the city of the past was hierarchical, oppressive, and traditional. Sure there were the tight knit neighborhoods but if you didn't want to be what your father was, or if you were an independent minded woman, then you had to get out of the old neighborhood. The car wasn't a menace but a liberator, it let you leave the city and travel on your own schedule, to make your own life. The suburb was a democratizing force for those who could get out and who wouldn't want to given the chance? Of course, this is a rhetorical game in which neither description is right, they simply present images that are agreeable or

disagreeable to one's intellectual taste. Perhaps the neighborhood of the past had a greater sense of community, but what are we supposed to do about it?

One might answer the above question by proposing new institutions or showing how technology has facilitated increased interaction or even "community", but the most common answer to the above question comes from planners and architects who utilize the Jeremiad. In general, planners will assume that their designs have far greater efficacy than they do, but it is planners and architects who work under the movement called New Urbanism who make greatest use of the Jeremiad in their plans. The book "Suburban Nation" by the Architects Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck makes use of nearly every possible argument that has been mentioned in this paper while advocating for their particular brand of design. New Urbanism typifies the use of the idealized past, copying antique designs and material culture, which by virtue of their pre-suburban-ness supposedly produce the same social "virtues" of the past. I believe one can safely say that the lack of porches and cul-de-sacs did not destroy the community which was actually the result of antiquated social forces. The New Urbanism relies upon the Jeremiad's image of the suburb so as to present their own designs in a particularly attractive light, this in spite of the fact that they are, as a general rule, still building suburbs. Some critiques of some suburban developments by the New Urbanists are well founded: they complain that hasty development results in needless waste and inefficiency. Of course, deliberate, informed planning is not the sole purview of New Urbanism, whose brand is built on an aesthetic that defies the exaggerated image of the suburb. One can safely assume that if a planner designed a model, efficient development with no cul-de-sacs, but populated this plan with the same ranchers or McMansions, then

the Jeremiad would still be applied to that development. It can be argued that the New Urbanism advocates for suburban design that is, at very least, more aesthetically pleasing. One of the most common words to be tossed at a suburban development is “ugly.” Even in this, I find the Jeremiad’s idealization of the past obviously present. I do not want to argue taste or design, all I will mention is that it can be argued that the suburb isn’t ugly, it’s new. The suburb and the houses which populate it have a long history of being found ugly by those who supposedly know these things, and yet, now we find that suburban Victorian manses which were derided by those in the know are now coveted buildings. Those taste based criticisms of New Urbanism aren’t telling truth to the powerful or to the unknowing suburbanite, they are advocating for safe, conservative design.

What do we want?

This paper has attempted to deconstruct a series of rather simple arguments built up around a popular sentiment. I characterize the Jeremiad’s driving force as a popular sentiment because it does not have the kind of strictures that a genuine intellectual movement has; the anti-suburban feeling is shared by critics spanning all kinds of intellectual and ideological positions. Where does such a sentiment come from? I’m not entirely sure. As I’ve mentioned before, I believe the majority of the Jeremiad’s force does not come from the arguments, but from the sentiment of distaste cum hatred that is aroused by the nearly uniform chorus of opinion. Deeper causes of this distaste for the suburb must have its roots in Marxist and Romantic thought which, as a general rule, despised the middle class of which the suburb stands as a perfect example.

I have taken apart and attempted to rebut the arguments employed by anti-sprawlists, but, according to my own conception of my opponents, because the anti-sprawlist has his opinions based in taste instead of argumentation my work is probably unconvincing. I consider this paper a useful study in the sheer amount of argumentation that the intellectual classes can develop from the nearly uniform taste and politics of the academy. I have written the above in an apologetic way, if only to confound the arguments of those who function without questioning their premises. This paper is, at very least, a plea for a kind of objectivity when considering of the suburb as a subject of scholarship or policy. The uniformity of judgment perpetuated by the Jeremiad blinds us to both the opportunities and the possibilities of the suburb as a subject of research and as a place for human habitation.

Image a, *Field Guide to Sprawl* p 30



Image b, *Field Guide to Sprawl* p 42 (note the imperiled farm in the right hand corner)



Image c, *Field Guide to Sprawl* p56



ⁱ "how the city sits solitary/ that was once full of people/ how is she become a widow"

ⁱⁱ "Order in Diversity: Community without Propinquity" by Melvin M. Webber from *Neighborhood, City and Metropolis* ed. Robert Gutman and David Popenoe p 51

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Suburban Canon over Time" Paul Mattingly. *Suburban Discipline* ed Peter Lang and Tam Miller (Princeton Architectural Press: Princeton, 1997) p40-41

^{iv} Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1985) p 3

^v Jackson's citations in the "Loss of Community" chapter do not suggest extensive use of intermural sources that would support Mattingly's argument for a canon. I would contend that Jackson was simply perpetuating stereotypical arguments.

^{vi} Jackson, p273-274

^{vii} Jackson, p 279-280

^{viii} Jackson p 279

^{ix} Jackson p 281

^x See Bruegman's extensive bibliography in the appendixes of *Sprawl*.

^{xi} "Bold New City or Built-up 'Burb Redefining Contemporary Suburbia. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock *American Quarterly* (vol 46 issue 1) March 1994 p 3

^{xii} Sharpe, Wallock p 11-12, Sharpe and Wallock also trade on some nasty, standard conceptions of product consumption.

^{xiii} A reviewer of Sharpe and Wallock was quick to notice that their article was essentially a reactionary rehearsal of the same anti-sprawlist sentiments that had existed since the 1950's. See Robert Fishman's review in the same issue of *American Quarterly* called "Urbanity and Suburbanity: Rethinking the 'Burbs"

^{xiv} The image of flying over the suburb was even used in Bruegman's *Sprawl*'s introduction. Andrew Ross in his review of *Sprawl* actually criticized Bruegman for using the aerial image as a prejudicial, abstract, and perhaps even pretty idea of the suburb, an image that works counter to his use of the Jeremiad. To Ross, one must view the suburb from the ground to see it's true unsightliness.

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- ^{xv} Hayden, Dolores. *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2004) p 30
- ^{xvi} Hayden "sitcom suburb" p 90, "boomburb" p 26, "zoomburb" p 118,
- ^{xvii} Hayden "greenfield" p 42, "leapfrog" p 56
- ^{xviii} Louis Mumford, *The City* p
- ^{xix} Jackson e.g. p277-277
- ^{xx} Ross, Andrew, Review of Bruegman's *Sprawl: A Compact History* and Hayden's *A Field Guide to Sprawl* in *Harvard Design Magazine* Fall/Winter 2007 (HGSD, Boston) p 104
- ^{xxi} Ross, p 106
- ^{xxii} The conservatism of the anti-sprawlist emphasizes that communities of the Victorian and turn of the century were superior. Surprisingly it mirrors other kinds of conservatism. One example of this strange convergence of conservatism (that I could not resist noting) was of a Heideggerian analysis of modern suburban development in the essay "Hic Jacet" by Robert Pogue Harrison which can be found in the book *Landscape and Power* edited by W. J. T. Mitchell.